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IT'S COMPLICATED ... PAST CULTURAL IDENTITY AND PLAIN BROKEN POTTERY

This paper has a twofold aim: to circumscribe the concept of identity and in particular cultural identity and to investigate whether a deeper knowledge about such matters may be relevant to the business of the Fautores. In this particular venue, we wish to make a contribution to the debate on cultural identity, understood as the identity of a group of individuals (or a single individual as far as she or he is influenced by belonging to a particular group or culture).¹

In the fields of philosophy, psycho-analysis, social theory and cultural studies, the individual is no longer considered as a coherent whole subject but as an amalgamation of various cultural identifiers, such as location, gender, race, history, nationality, language, sexuality, age, status, religious beliefs, ethnicity and aesthetics. Culture may be considered a historical reservoir of these identifiers and is accordingly important in helping to shape identity. It is generally acknowledged that all active members of contemporary society step in and out of multiple identities many times each day depending on the social contexts she or he is part of – defined by age, gender, family relationships, workplace, political and religious beliefs etc.²

Were the issues at stake less complicated in Antiquity? True, when Moses asked God to reveal his identity (Exodus 3:14), he was told: “*I am who I am*”. What the Bible does not say is whether Moses was not perhaps a little puzzled by this answer, but then again the words came from God. Still, a tautology is not what we are looking for here. Complexity of identity is what we need to consider and the idea that we can reconstruct aspects of identity by studying pottery. This is no easy task, because the connection (if any) between archaeological artefacts and ancient cultural identity is far from straightforward.³

Our discipline propagates that a defining feature of human behaviour is its ability to handle a variety of artefacts, but paradoxically it seems next to impossible to predict (or rather postdict) identity – cultural and otherwise – in the highly complex Roman society from artefactual assemblages. In science, such paradoxes are dangerous. The online Oxford English dictionary warns us: a paradox is “*a seemingly absurd or contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated may prove to be well founded or true*”. Is that it then? Should we admit to this paradox and confess that

archaeology cannot reach such levels of interpretation? The answer is of course no. But how may we then approach the connection between material culture and cultural identity in archaeology? First of all, we must admit to what we cannot do. Secondly, we must be aware of aspects of social and archaeological theories, which provide a framework for the issue of cultural identity. Finally, we need to put matters in practice with the full knowledge that even the best of case-studies will only in part cover the complexities of a theoretical framework and the realities of human behaviour in the past.

What can we not do?

We cannot systematically approach the topic of cultural identity based on individual cases. To be sure, archaeologists do find remains of individuals, even in association with material culture, for instance in the case of burials. Inscriptions provide another case in point. But the problem with both kinds of evidence is that they are very hard to make sense of when approached individually.

How to date, for instance, an *unguentarium* among the goods in the grave of a woman that was recently discovered at *Sagalassos* (SW Turkey) (**fig. 1**)? Judging by standard typologies, the second half of the 1st century BC onwards is an acceptable *terminus post quem* for its bulbous shape with flat base. Also, we are apt to consider it common knowledge that the ceramic *unguentaria* were being replaced by blown glass counterparts from the second half of the 1st century AD onwards. But who can say if the small community of *Sagalassos* in the Taurus Mountains – a couple of days’ journey from the Mediterranean coast – was chronologically sensitive to the latest fashion in *unguentaria*. May not new vessel types have arrived later and remained in use longer at such fairly remote locations? In such cases, standard typo-chronologies can only provide an external chronological indicator. The actual chronology should be defined from studying the context provided by the entire burial compound, so far consisting of 18 individuals. We need to replace individual, typological chronology with a contextual approach based on sample size. The same holds true if we wish to approach the cultural identity of the deceased female: we have to place her remains and grave goods in a wider sample series.⁴

1 GRUEN 2011.

2 SMITH 1991, 3–8; HOY 2004; SMITH 2010, 20–22; HALES/HODOS 2010.

3 For the concept of identity in archaeology, see MESKELL/ PREUCEL 2004; DIAZ-ANDREU/LUCY 2005.

4 Cf. LUCY 2005, 87; GOSDEN 2005, 193–211.



Fig. 1. Ceramic *unguentarium*, forming part of a set of grave goods, found within an adult female burial, dated c. 100 CE.

To take another example: the epigraphic habit was in full swing in Roman Imperial times, exemplified for instance by a dedicatory inscription to Titus Flavius Severianus Neon, inaugurating the library at *Sagalassos* shortly after AD 120. A name is of course directly related to one's identity, and in this case, we are dealing with the Roman *tria nomina* indicating that our Neon held Roman citizenship. Or should it rather be "our Titus", as he was a grandson of the first Roman knight at *Sagalassos*, who introduced the imperial cult to the city? You will understand that addressing our nobleman with Titus or Neon makes a significant difference in defining aspects of his cultural identity. The context is (again) of crucial importance, and recent research on regional onomastics in Pisidia by Rob Rens indicates that at *Sagalassos* single Greek names are actually the most popular category, followed by single SW Anatolian names.⁵ Still, even though there are few new Roman names in total, they occur more frequently at *Sagalassos* than at other sites in the region of Pisidia, indicating a degree of eagerness on behalf of the elite to join the structures of empire. Generally speaking, however, giving names was clearly a traditional family matter at *Sagalassos*, with newly born sons frequently receiving their grandfather's

names, and in many cases there was nothing Roman about these. So perhaps it should be *both* Titus *and* Neon, with the latter being mostly employed in local conditions and Titus (or the full name) in official contexts related to the Roman administration? Again: we cannot take an individual case at face value; context is needed - and perhaps more than one conclusion should be allowed for. In the case of cultural identity, there seem to be more than two sides to each coin.

What we learn from these examples is similar: when approaching cultural identity sample size and context matter. And so does multi-scalarity, i.e. combining scales of analysis, also turns out to be a crucial strategy for research into cultural identity by relating evidence on individuals, households, communities, regions and the Empire. The scales should not merely be conceived of as physical entities, e.g. the walls that define a house, but rather as social constructs whereby, for instance, space, status, gender and age relationships determine the structure and dynamics of households.

But in order to approach those analytical scales we need first to come to grips with how to translate our favourite evidence on material culture – pottery – into meaningful explanations in social and cultural terms. And for this we need a sound theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework

The Oxford online dictionary provides a useful definition of the term "theory": "*a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained*". For some, the wording 'independent of the thing to be explained' may come across as uncomfortable. There are so many facts still to be learned about Roman pottery, concerning to fabrics, shapes/forms, places of production, chronology, exchange, consumption, use and find contexts etc., that it may seem premature to attempt a theoretical understanding of the issues involved. Undeniably, the current level of data generation and analysis in archaeology (as in most other scientific disciplines) leaves much to be desired.⁶ But embracing theory does not entail that the next stage is the development of a general scientific theory, i.e. a comprehensive explanation of some aspect of nature that is supported by a vast body of evidence, such as Darwin's theory of evolution by means of natural selection in biology. Rather, it implies our urgent need to reflect on how to best explain our data.

Theoretical reflections not only increase the social relevance of archaeology, but help us avoid the risk of working in haphazard or redundant ways when dealing with ancient pottery. If we were to focus only on data gathering, we would quickly run the risk of being marginalized by fellow archaeologists or ancient historians, because our results would be highly technical and difficult to incorporate in their lines of research. Even worse: funding bodies would also be inclined to turn us down, classifying our applications as non-fundamental, applied research, fit for the category of expert knowledge, but not worthy of science. Indeed, as most of us

⁵ RENS ET AL. in press.

⁶ See POBLOME ET AL. 2012b, 13–14: "our homework is not finished".

work with tax payer's money, our research must be relevant to society. And this is where theory comes in: to make sure that our results on a given set of data of Roman pottery reach a higher level of meaning, useful to fellow scholars of the past and, when possible, also to others.

So, do we all need to do theory, or are we perhaps already doing theory, one way or the other? Certainly, we don't all have to become Ian Hodders or John Bintliffs. But we need to recognize that materiality, long-term perspectives and the acceptance of diversity and differences of perspective are approaches required to interpret archaeological data. And though it is rarely made specific, these qualities may indeed be found in many contributions over the years by the *Fautores* themselves, which are aligned with one of two positions: some papers see actors (be they pots, potters or consumers) act rationally according to universal principles (for instance that regional communities will adopt Roman practices under the aegis of the Empire), whereas others consider pots to reflect activity patterns, which are meaningfully and socially produced in complex historical and cultural contexts (e.g. that regional Roman pottery assemblages in Spain or Romania are dissimilar and interact differently with the Roman commonwealth. If such assemblages do "Romanize" as it were, they do so in their own ways).⁷ Both domains of ceramological praxis can serve the wider archaeological community – be they specifically theoretical or not – and this also holds true for other domains, provided that we become more explicit of what we are presenting a case-study of. Rather than merely placing the pottery of the case-study in time and space, this implies stating explicitly why the case-study was interesting to set up in the first place.

Many of us are convinced that our pottery is a crucial key to understanding ancient society and economy; all we need to do now is explain better in which ways this relevance can be demonstrated. However, it is possible to reach the goal by combining several different roads, heeding the recent advice by John Bintliff: "*that a healthy core theory should combine insights and models from seemingly contrasted intellectual and methodological positions, deploying several, equally valid approaches to probe the complex structure of past life, rather than through one ideological package*"⁸.

Identity, cultural or otherwise, is built on a sense of belonging and active engagement with one or more groups, excluding others. Identities are constructed in social interaction, and we acquire and maintain identities through choice and agency. Identities cannot be static and need not be simple, but are strategic, positional, potentially multi-layered – positions that may even be in conflict with each other. Identity does not develop randomly, but balances the ability to act against an understanding of how the world operates by principles governing practice. Information, knowledge and power can affect the balance, but cultural identity remains an act of balance nonetheless. Cultural identity is maintained and reproduced as part of a social process, implying that there is no archetypical combination of, for instance, language, material culture and architecture resulting in this or that fixed type

of cultural, let alone ethnic, identity. The reality of cultural identity is untidy as there are no neat packages of culture.⁹

Archaeological remains, including sherds, may therefore no longer be considered merely as reflections of something in the past, but should rather be seen as the residue of material conditions that were organised by past social practices. Material culture needs to be contextualized, in the sense that we wish to understand the ways in which people made, used and discarded artefacts, both as a matter of practice, as well as a medium through which social interactions and relationships were negotiated. A productive way of linking material culture to aspects of cultural identity is to apply the concept of *chaîne opératoire*, meaning contextualizing every step in the biography of objects, from the selection of raw materials for production, over activity and usage patterns to discard practices.¹⁰

Best practice

To be sure, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. A selection of examples is required to make some of the mentioned concepts palatable.

Why not start with food and dining practices? We all eat and drink. Although we do this to survive in biological terms, habits and traditions, context, opportunity and options, position, status or religious conviction represent some of the factors affecting what food is actually eaten and how. That is why the study of diet and eating habits in antiquity reveals aspects of many complex social and cultural questions. First and foremost, eating habits are very traditional. Who doesn't like mama's kitchen? Indeed, the household is often the place where eating habits are developed, forming part of education and the organisation of daily life and routine.

But food and drink also represent social and cultural factors. In the same way as with material culture, diet and food habits are a sign of how we regard life, our position in the communities of which we are members as well as our interpersonal relationships. On the one hand, dining brings people together on a regular basis, such as family meals, and extraordinary events, such as marriages. On the other hand, food can distinguish and divide people too. In antiquity, for instance, the rich and famous were proverbially associated with their lavish dinners, displaying a wealth and exclusivity that was entirely beyond the reach of most of the population. Food, drink and eating habits reinforce participation in various social or cultural groups or sanction otherness within a given community.

In this context, reference may be made to a small series of pottery sherds of dishes or pans at *Sagalassos*. The shallow pans were made from the same fabric as the local cooking wares, while the interior was entirely covered with a characteristically thick slip layer (**fig. 2**). Some fragments had flat applied handles, while their diameter and flat base indicate that the pans were heated on a flat surface, such as a grill over a fire or an oven floor. The shape and finish of these pans

⁷ Cf. REVELL 2009, 189–190.

⁸ BINTLIFF 2011, 18.

⁹ MATTINGLY 2011.

¹⁰ PEÑA 2007; LAWALL/LUND 2011.



Fig. 2. Fragment of a pan in so-called Pompeian red ware style, made nearby *Sagalassos*.

differs from typical Hellenistic *lopades* and pans, with their wheel-trimmed and wet-smoothed floors. Most fragments identified so far at *Sagalassos* can be associated with early Roman Imperial contexts, datable between the end of the 1st century BC and around 100 AD. No predecessors of this shape and finish (i.e. the particular thick slip) are known so far. Although these pans were never common, they all but disappear in later contexts. This range of objects failed to have a lasting impact on the local material culture, in other words, but the pans were typical and particular enough to have had a specific reason of existence during the early Roman Imperial period. It seems justified to associate this category of objects made in the vicinity of *Sagalassos* with the group of so-called “Pompeian red ware”, which share similar shapes, the non-stick slip layer and (albeit in a minority of cases) the oxidized colour. The latter, resembling the reddish hues of wall plaster decoration at Pompeii, provided the inspiration for the name of the group by Siegfried Loeschke¹¹. Various production centres in Central Italy were making these shallow pans with non-stick coating, from the middle of the 3rd century BC onwards. Traditionally, Pompeian red wares are considered to have been used in bread-baking. From the 1st century BC, and certainly from the Augustan period onwards, Pompeian red ware baking dishes are attested in many contexts throughout the empire. Other production centres started manufacturing these wares in the many regions of the Empire. A production centre of Pompeian red ware is presumed at *Phocaea*, western Asia Minor, for instance, from the 1st century BC onwards.¹²

Likewise, except in the northern provinces of the Empire, the production of the baking dishes ceased in the course of the 1st century AD.

The timing of the initiation of production of these pans in the vicinity of *Sagalassos* was apparently non-coincidental. In early Roman Imperial times, the city was officially incorporated into the new Augustan *provincia Galatia*, which subsequently saw the foundation of a string of *colonia* in *Pisidia*. This process added thousands of veterans from the final civil war and their families to the population of the region. The origin of these immigrants need not necessarily have been Italy, but their military background and veteran status made them representative of the new central authority. Presumably, their living and eating habits were to some extent influenced by their 20 years in army service. During this period, the veterans could have been accustomed to Italian *sigillata* as the fashionable table ware of the moment, as well as to baking bread or preparing some other type of food in Pompeian red ware.¹³ After all, the army has been considered as a factor explaining the extensive and fairly rapid distribution of both product lines.¹⁴ May the limited series of locally made Pompeian red ware not indicate a conscious attempt at incorporating a new culinary habit, perhaps bread-baking? Unfortunately, the pottery of the Pisidian *coloniae* remains undocumented, so it is impossible to judge whether the potter/entrepreneur in the vicinity of *Sagalassos* had the immigrants in mind as consumers of his wares or not, and we cannot tell either whether the veteran households imported their cooking wares from elsewhere. Still,

¹¹ LOESCHKE 1909, 271.

¹² HAYES 1997, 78-79.

¹³ Cf. POBLOME ET AL. 2004.

¹⁴ WALLACE-HADRILL 2008, 415-416.



Fig. 3. Early Imperial *mastos*, made at *Sagalassos*.

the specificity of the material and its chronological context are indicative of the acceptance, to a certain extent, of a new type of kitchen utensil and associated foodstuffs and eating habits at *Sagalassos*. The local archaeological record does yet not provide adequate evidence to suggest that the introduction of such baking pans was widespread or a lasting phenomenon, however. In fact, most of them were found in secondary contexts, prohibiting a more detailed contextual analysis of these finds. It seems fair to conclude therefore that, even if bread *à l'italienne* was consumed at *Sagalassos*, it was not to everybody's taste, and the habit disappeared within a couple of generations, presumably indicating that local grain products and associated eating habits remained most popular.¹⁵

Even if *Sagalassos* was incorporated into the Empire and was developing spectacular building programmes to celebrate this happening, the cultural identity of this local community seems to be complex if one scratches below the surface.

Looking at the tablewares, similar aspects can be brought forward. When the former Hellenistic potters' quarter of *Sagalassos* was abandoned in early Imperial times, and the potters were granted permission to install themselves in an area to the east of the Theatre, they reinvigorated the typology of their tablewares, starting to make distinctive *Sagalassos* sigillata. But in contrast to what one might expect in times of Augustan tableware boom under the influence of Italian sigillata, their initial most common forms had nothing to do with that very Roman tableware. Instead they mostly stayed true to a local repertoire of a particular selection of Hellenistic shapes, of which the most popular drinking vessel, the *mastos*, is the best example (fig. 3).¹⁶

In this sense, both the table and cooking wares at *Sagalassos* indicate that, even if there are clear signs that members of the local elite promoted the message of the Roman Empire, with the result that parts of the local community introduced new elements into their material culture, this did not imply major realignments with a new Roman cultural identity for *Sagalassos*. To be sure, the local community was aware that they belonged to a geo-political structure, but aspects of path dependency and regional history played an important part in gradually shifting their collective cultural identity. What is of importance is that the outcome of such shifts in cultural identity cannot be predicted. Not everybody wanted to – or had – to “become Roman” in the same way. Moreover, Roman culture was far too polythetic to be distributed as a ready-made form of identity, ready for consumption.¹⁷ What we see instead is ambiguous processes of integration in the Roman world at large, engaging a multitude of types of groups and collective identities, without there being an encompassing scenario of how such integration should come about, nor normative expectations of what such integration should imply. There are many examples of how local communities experience their own trajectory of integration. Such trajectories expose a field of tension, with the Empire obviously offering a more efficient structure for communication opening a bigger scene for local communities to propel themselves on, nurturing aspects of sameness and difference throughout the Empire. A lot of funerary statues are *togati*, for instance, but the variation in regional expression of the central idea is astonishingly rich. These sculptures can no longer be considered art historical stereotypes, expressing a binary opposition between roman-ness and other-ness, but symbolize complex and dynamic contexts of social and cul-

¹⁵ POBLOME 2012.

¹⁶ POBLOME ET AL. 2007. The same holds true for Eastern Sigillata A Ware and Cypriot Sigillata, cf. LUND 2002 and 2005.

¹⁷ REVELL 2009, 9.

tural interaction. All we have to do now is think away these statues and put pottery instead.

The next example introduces the concept of scale into the discussion. If we all agree that cultural identity is a collective enterprise, the logical next question concerns their extent or scale. Is there a certain social, economic or geographical threshold to pass in order to define a collective cultural identity? Unfortunately, in most social sciences and archaeology these aspects of identity are mostly defined in fairly straightforward and uni-dimensional ways. When considering the Roman Empire and the pottery assemblages which we all study, most of us would probably feel comfortable with the proposition that ancient regions should be the most apt analytical scale to approach the definition of cultural identity. Ancient regions present us with an implicit feeling of cohesion while their definition is not too strict, as even ancient authors are not always on one line when defining these regions. Yet, how to define a region?

Ancient Boeotia spontaneously feels like one of these regions, fit to define its cultural identity, even if this would mostly concern boors and peasants. Rinse Willet recently investigated and compared the nature and composition of the urban survey pottery collections from three Boeotian settlements, at *Tanagra*, *Thespieae* and *Koroneia*.¹⁸ These collections all contained imported wares as well as presumed local products such as tablewares adhering to a comparable logic of design at all three sites. However, striking differences were also noted. At *Tanagra* predominantly jugs and table-amphorae were made locally, most probably as a consequence of the relatively high proportion of imported tablewares available at this site, creating less demand for the local potters to make bowls and dishes. The bowls and dishes that the *Tanagra* potters did produce follow to a certain degree the logic of design of imported examples, especially in the later Roman centuries in relation to African Red Slip Ware. But far fewer imported tableware was attested at *Thespieae*, leaving more scope for the local potters, resulting in a higher proportion of local open shapes. There, the repertoire of shapes was also more original and less linked to typologies of major export wares. Noticeably, the table-amphorae, which were well represented at *Tanagra*, were all but absent. At *Koroneia*, the proportion of closed vessels, including table-amphorae, was somewhat higher in comparison but does not reach the total of *Tanagra*. The local tableware shapes are comparable to major export wares to some degree. Similarities were mostly noted in the earlier imperial centuries, while in further contrast to *Tanagra*, the imported forms of inspiration were actually not found at *Koroneia*, as imports are rarer at this site than at the two others.

Considering these findings on the backdrop of the issue of cultural identity, it becomes clear that the sites in Roman Boeotia do not all sing along one and the same tune. Even if these sites are located within a range of 30 to 50 km from one another, the spectrum of their pottery production wares differ from a chronological and typological point of view.¹⁹ This example illustrates that a politically defined region may not always be the most straightforward scale at which to analyse cultural identity, suggesting that there is a lot of scope in the Roman world for the study of local diversity in trajectories of integration and the development of micro-identities.²⁰

From these examples it should be clear that defining aspects of cultural identity in the past will always be a work in progress, and this seeming inconclusiveness should be welcomed as good news, because it brings us – the archaeologists – back to the fore. Our detailed knowledge of the past and its material remains is needed to give meaning to the observed data patterns and to help reconstruct the meaning of our pottery in constructing social and cultural identity. To do so is truly a complicated issue. Facebook – the popular social network website with nearly one billion active users worldwide – provides the option to choose the term “*It’s complicated*” to define one’s relationship status – the more obvious relationship options being “*single*” or “*in a relationship*”. Most of us would surely prefer one of the latter conditions, but life – and the study of Roman pottery – is not always that simple.

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¹⁸ WILLET 2012.

¹⁹ POBLOME ET AL. 2012a.

²⁰ WHITMARSH 2010. On changes in the nature of pottery types, see GOSDEN 2005, 195.

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